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ABSTRACT

Research on various facets of adult learners' experiences in postsecondary education has established the following facts: (1) instructors who help adult learners connect their real-world experiences and what they already know to what they are learning in the classroom are perceived as most helpful and motivating; (2) adult undergraduates generally view learning as a process of active engagement in constructing meaning from classroom material rather than passive reception of knowledge; (3) many adult undergraduates define success not just in terms of academic success and meeting the expectations of others but also in terms of what is important in their lives; and (4) factors related to race, class, and gender are important in shaping the academic experiences of African-American adults and women in postsecondary education. The following recommendations for practice have been offered: (1) involve adult learners in sharing and critiquing their life experiences in the classroom; (2) be sensitive to individual differences; (3) adopt curriculum that is inclusive and culturally relevant; and (4) use instructional strategies that enable adults to form relationships. Adult students have special concerns that should be addressed in the postsecondary classroom. It is important that these special concerns be addressed in light of each adult student's individual needs. (Contains 11 references.) (MN)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

PRACTICE APPLICATION BRIEF NO. 17

Adult Learners in Postsecondary Education

by Susan Imel
2001

Higher education is quickly becoming the knowledge crossroads for adult society, rather than a mere cul-de-sac for elite youth learners and esoteric knowledge. (Kasworm, Sandmann, and Sissel 2000, p. 449)

Adult students, those 25 years of age and over, currently represent nearly one-half of credit students enrolled in higher education (Kasworm, Sandmann, and Sissel 2000). During the past 30 years, adult student enrollment in postsecondary education increased dramatically from 2.4 million in 1970 to 6.5 million in 2000 (Aslanian 2001). In this period, the number of women learners increased threefold, and the number of adult learners aged 35 and over increased more than 2 1/2 times (Kasworm, Sandmann, and Sissel 2000). Most adults enter postsecondary education for reasons related to their careers, but family reasons also precipitate a return to school for many (Aslanian 2000).

Although the National Center for Education Statistics projects adult enrollments will not continue to increase at the same rate as in the past (Snyder and Hoffman 2001), the presence of adult students in postsecondary education will continue to challenge how institutions structure programs and services and deliver instruction (Kasworm, Sandmann, and Sissel 2000). With its focus on teaching and learning, the classroom is one arena in which the presence of adults is creating tension in postsecondary education. "Adults enter a higher education arena to learn advanced knowledge in relation to their own meaning structures, their world, and their future," but the traditional classroom is not necessarily structured to accommodate their needs (ibid., pp. 456-457). What expectations do adults have about learning? What do they consider valuable knowledge? How do they define success in the classroom? How do they view instructors? What are the experiences of adults of color in the classroom? Questions related to adults in the postsecondary classroom are addressed in this *Brief*. Findings from research are highlighted and suggestions for practice are provided.

What the Research Says

Research has examined different facets of the experiences of adult learners in postsecondary education. Findings from four related areas—instructors and instruction, cognition or knowledge construction, expectations of outcomes, and the effect of race—provide information about the experiences of adults in classrooms.

Instructors and Instruction

The classroom is central to the learning experiences of many adult students in postsecondary education (Donaldson and Graham 1999; Donaldson, Graham, Kasworm, and Dirkx 1999; Kasworm 1997; Kasworm and Blowers 1994). Because of time restrictions, adult students are much less likely to be involved in extracurricular activities than traditional age students, and, as a result, the relationships they develop with their instructors and other students and their in-class learning experiences are particularly meaningful to them (Kasworm and Blowers 1994; Donaldson et al. 2000). For adult students, the classroom becomes the "main stage for the creation and negotiation of meaning for learning, for being a student, and for defining the collegiate experience" (Kasworm 1997, p. 7).

Instructors who help adult learners connect their real-world experiences and what they already know to what they are learning in the classroom are perceived as most helpful and motivating (Donaldson et al. 2000; Kasworm and Blowers 1994). Instructional strategies that are particularly meaningful include those that provide (1) examples and explanations that help learners connect what they already know to new material, (2) opportunities for class discussion of topics, and (3) small-group projects that require active involvement (Donaldson et al. 2000). In Donaldson et al.'s study of 13 returning undergraduate students, 6 students reported that instructors interfered with their learning when they assumed students were homogenous, failed to understand different approaches to learning, and expected students to learn information that the students considered irrelevant.

Cognition and Knowledge Construction

In their study of adult undergraduates, Kasworm and Blowers (1994) found that students spoke of balancing two different types of knowledge and knowing. The first was academic learning that included theory and memorization and the second was real-world learning that could be applied directly to their daily actions. When adults first returned to the classroom, they experienced the apprenticeship role of learning to be a student again but then entered into a deeper approach to learning and to making meaning between what they were learning in the classroom and their adult roles (Kasworm 1997). They tapped into cognitive structures rich with previous knowledge and experience and connected this to new information they were learning in the classroom (Donaldson et al. 2000; Donaldson and Graham 1999; Donaldson, Graham, Kasworm, and Dirkx 1999).

For the most part, adult undergraduates did not view learning as a process of knowledge reproduction, that is, they were not passively receiving knowledge. They were actively engaged in constructing meaning from the classroom material within the broader context of their lives (Donaldson and Graham 1999; Donaldson, Graham, Kasworm, and Dirkx 1999; Kasworm 1997). "Adults integrate new learning by making connections to existing knowledge schema. They reflect on rich, personal experiences and draw on their previous knowledge and wisdom to make meaning of new material and to understand it in a way that transforms their own previous understanding" (Donaldson and Graham 1999, p. 27). Instructors and instructional strategies that help them accomplish this meaning making are particularly valued.

Outcomes

Studies of college outcomes generally focus solely on academic knowledge but adults may be seeking different outcomes. Donaldson et al. (2000) found that adult undergraduates defined success not just in academic terms and meeting the expectations of others (e.g., instructors) but also in terms of what is important in their lives. They distinguished clearly between success in college and success in learning on two dimensions: who decided on the standards for success—themselves or the institution—and the potential value of what was learned.

Although traditional outcomes related to intellectual and emotional growth are important, Kasworm (1997) also found that adult students' outcomes are connected to their perceptions of how well they integrate their academic and real-life perspectives. Kasworm identified three types of outcomes: separate and distinct academic and real-world outcomes, when adults keep separate what they are learning in the classroom and in life contexts such as work, family, and community; expanded, real-world knowledge structures in which adults apply what they are learning in academic settings to extend their learning in other settings; and integrated and transformed aca-

demic and real-world knowledge structures in which adults integrate what they have learned in all settings in which they are engaged.

The factors of instruction, instructors, cognition and knowledge construction, and outcomes are all interrelated. Adult undergraduate students have a reservoir of previous experience and knowledge that affects their classroom experiences and their expectations about learning outcomes.

Race

African Americans constitute a larger proportion of the student body in older age groups than among students under the age of 24, but race has been relatively unexamined in research on adult students in higher education (Aiken, Cervero, and Johnson-Bailey 2001; Ross-Gordon and Brown-Haywood 2000). Many of the factors described earlier are true for African-American adult learners in higher education. Connecting academic or classroom learning with their real-world experiences and the student-teacher relationship were both important elements for the African-American adult undergraduates in Ross-Gordon and Brown-Haywood's study (2000), for example. Research that has examined the experiences of African-Americans adults in higher education, however, has found that it is factors related to race and class and, for women, gender that are more important in shaping their academic experience than the factors identified in studies that do not isolate race as a factor (Aiken, Cervero, and Johnson-Bailey 2001; Johnson-Bailey and Cervero 1996).

African-American women in higher education experienced a "culture of racism" (Aiken, Cervero, and Johnson-Bailey 2001, p. 314). The power and privilege of the world outside academia were mirrored in the classroom, influencing interactions with other students and with faculty. These women routinely experienced exclusion and stereotyping in, for example, the curriculum, class discussions, and small-group work (ibid.; Johnson-Bailey and Cervero 1996). The African-American men and women in Ross-Gordon and Brown-Haywood's study also felt that the curriculum did not reflect their histories and experiences and that the worst instructors were perceived as demonstrating bias based on student race and gender. Clearly, race is a factor that influences how African American adults experience higher education.

Recommendation for Practice

- **Involve adult learners in sharing and critiquing their life experiences in the classroom.** By combining theory and practice, instructors can provide meaningful learning experiences for adults through the use of constructivist learning strategies that integrate their previous knowledge and experience with new information (Kasworm and Blowers 1994).
- **Be sensitive to individual differences.** Adult students want instructors who understand their special concerns and who can address differences related to learning styles and cultural and racial background. Instructors need to understand differences based on race and culture, but they should not generalize this information by neglecting to recognize students as individuals. To prepare faculty and staff for working with adult learners, institutions should provide professional development opportunities on diversity and equity (Ross-Gordon and Brown-Haywood 2000). Such programs should address issues related to power and its manifestations in the classroom, particularly as experienced by people of color and women.
- **Adopt curriculum that is inclusive and culturally relevant.** Curriculum should include materials and examples that are relevant to adults and to different cultural groups. The historical and cultural experiences of all groups of learners should be reflected in materials used in the classroom (ibid.).
- **Use instructional strategies that enable adults to form relationships.** Instructional strategies that enable adult students to form relationships with other learners are especially valued. Because the classroom is the focal point for the collegiate experiences of many adult students, instructors can foster the development of peer connections through the use of small groups, discussion, and other strategies (Donaldson et al. 2000). Peer work should be monitored to avoid exclusion based on race and/or gender (Aiken, Cervero, and Johnson-Bailey 2001).

Statistically, in the past 2 decades, adults students have changed the face of postsecondary education. What is not clear is the extent to which their presence has changed instructional practices. As a group, adult students have special concerns that should be addressed in the postsecondary classroom. However, these concerns must be addressed in light of the individual needs of each adult student.

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